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NEGRO ILLITERACY IN THE UNITED STATES

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The study of illiteracy among the Negroes of the United States constitutes one of the most interesting chapters in the story of their achievements in fifty years of freedom. In most of the slave states, before 1861, it was a criminal offense to teach any Negro, slave or free, to read or write; so that illiteracy in the South among the Negroes at the time of the emancipation was nearly 100 per cent.

While conditions were somewhat different in the North, and educational opportunities were not wholly denied, the number of Negroes who could avail themselves of these opportunities was so small as to affect only slightly the rate of illiteracy for the country as a whole. Conservative estimates place the illiteracy of the race at between 95 and 97 per cent at the beginning of freedom. It is clear that this condition in no way indicates either the capacity or inclination of the race for acquiring education. It indicates merely the status of a people reared in barbarism, transplanted into the midst of civilization, but bearing none of its burdens and responsibilities, and participating in no way in its social or cultural activities. The position of the Negro in the United States as a ward of civilization makes it practically impossible to compare either his situation or his achievements with that of any other race or people in modern times. Whatever progress he has made since the beginning of political freedom cannot be attributed solely to his own desire for knowledge, nor to his inherent capacity, but must be regarded in the light of his imitative ability and the opportunities afforded for his advancement by the white population in the midst of which he has lived.

Under the régime of slavery there was not only this general condition, due to the attitude of the masters enforced by legal enactments, but there was likewise the absence on the part of the Negro of any motive for the acquiring of even the smallest elements of education. At the beginning of the period of freedom, the presence of this untutored race in the midst of American civilization formed an irresist-

ible appeal to philanthropic spirited citizens for the education of this new class of freedmen. Had the Negro been left to himself, it would be difficult to predict what his present status would be. Notwithstanding the mistakes in the earlier period of the reconstruction in educational methods provided by the white population, and notwithstanding the inadequacy, not to say neglect, of Negro educational facilities up to the present time, the Negro has benefited greatly by such opportunities as are afforded by American educational institutions in general.

In order to understand the present problem of illiteracy of the Negro race, a survey of the statistics collected by the census bureau over a period of years needs careful study and analysis. In the following table, several decades are presented for the purpose of a compara-

TABLE I

Class of population	Percentage of illiterates in the population 10 years of age and over			
	1910	1900	1890	1880
Total.....	7.7	10.7	13.3	17.0
White.....	5.0	6.2	7.7	9.4
Native.....	3.0	4.6	6.2	8.7
Native parentage.....	3.7	5.7	7.5
Foreign or mixed parentage.....	1.1	1.6	2.2
Foreign born.....	12.7	12.9	13.1	12.0
Negro.....	30.4	44.5	57.1	70.0
Indian.....	45.3	56.2	45.2	
Chinese.....	15.8	29.0		
Japanese.....	9.2	18.2		
All others.....	39.9

Abstract of the Thirteenth Census, 1910, p. 239.

tive study. This table shows not only the amount and distribution of illiteracy among the various portions of the population, but as well the decline in illiteracy which has taken place in the period from 1880 to 1910, in the various elements of the populations.

Taking up these two principal aspects of the subjects in the order indicated, we find that illiteracy in the Negro group is 6 times that of the white group; or, if we eliminate the persons of foreign birth or extraction, 10 times as great; there being 3 illiterate persons in every 100 native white persons and 30.4 illiterate persons in every 100

Negroes. This comparison is wholly misleading and unfair in view of the distribution of the races.

Two main phases of this distribution must be considered. First, the geographic situation and second, the urban and rural conditions.

The following table is presented in order to show the relative statistics of illiteracy of persons 10 years of age and over in the different sections of the country for 1910.

Here we discover that Negro illiteracy in the North is not greatly in excess of white illiteracy in the South, the figures being respectively 10.5 per cent and 7.7 per cent, while in two of the southern

TABLE II

	All classes	Native white of native parentage	Negro
United States.....	7.7	3.7	30.4
New England.....	5.3	0.7	7.8
Middle Atlantic.....	5.7	1.2	7.9
East North Central.....	3.4	1.7	11.0
West North Central.....	2.9	1.7	14.9
South Atlantic.....	16.0	8.0	32.5
East South Central.....	17.4	9.6	34.8
West South Central.....	13.2	5.6	33.1
Mountain.....	6.9	3.6	8.0
Pacific.....	3.0	0.4	6.3
North.....	4.3	1.4	10.5
South.....	15.6	7.7	33.3
West.....	4.4	1.7	7.0

Abstract of the Thirteenth Census, 1910, p. 243.

divisions it is 8.0 per cent and 9.6 per cent for the white, actually approximating that of the Negroes in New England. The higher rate of illiteracy in the South for both the white and colored portions of the population is attributed to the lack of facilities for securing an education. This at least is given as an explanation for the disparity in the rate of illiteracy in the white population in the two sections of the country. To those who have studied the school conditions, particularly in the South, it seems clear that inadequate as are facilities for white children, those afforded the colored children are much more inadequate. If facilities in the South were equal for black and white children, and as ample as in the North, it is safe to assume that the

rate of illiteracy among Negroes in the South would much more nearly approximate that in the North. This of course would be true of both groups.

In further explanation of the disparity in the rate of illiteracy for the Negro race as a whole as compared with that of the white, it should be remembered that whereas 60.6 per cent of the white population in 1910 was located in the North and 32 per cent in the South, but 10.5 per cent of the Negroes was found in the North and 89.5 per cent in the South. Thus 89.5 per cent of the colored population in the United States shares the inadequate school facilities of the 32 per cent of the white population. Since the illiteracy among the Negroes in the North is only 10.5 per cent while that of the illiteracy of the white population of the South is 7.7 per cent, it is clear that if there was an equal distribution either of population or of educational opportunities, much of the difference in the rates between the races would disappear. In other words, viewing the rate as a whole, it is impossible to show that the difference is fundamentally racial.

A further comparison must be made in regard to the distribution of illiterates between city and country. The following table gives the distribution of illiteracy of persons 10 years of age and over in 1910 in the urban and rural population.

Of the total native white population of native parentage 10 years of age and over in continental United States in 1910, 37.7 per cent resided in cities of 2,500 or more inhabitants, and 62.3 per cent in rural districts and towns of less than 2,500 inhabitants. The illiteracy among the urban native born whites of native parentage was 0.9 per cent. In the rural districts it was 5.4 per cent. This difference in the main is conceded to be due, not to differences in the population under rural and urban conditions, but to the superior facilities for education afforded in urban communities. For example, the small amount of illiteracy among persons of native birth but of foreign or mixed parentage amounting to only 1.1 per cent is explained not upon the basis of race differences between the persons of native and foreign ancestry, but is attributed largely to the fact that persons of foreign born or mixed parentage are for the most part city dwellers, and they have for that reason the superior advantage afforded for education in the cities.

Turning now to the Negro population, we discover that of those 10 years of age and over, 17.7 per cent are urban and 82.3 per cent

are rural. Comparing the percentages of urban and rural conditions, we discover that 17.7 per cent of Negroes share, however unfairly because of racial discriminations, the advantages for education of the

TABLE III

Division and class of community	All classes	Native white of native parentage	Negroes
United States			
Urban.....	5.1	0.9	17.6
Rural.....	10.1	5.4	36.1
New England			
Urban.....	5.6	0.5	7.1
Rural.....	3.8	1.2	16.9
Middle Atlantic			
Urban.....	5.8	0.6	7.0
Rural.....	5.2	1.9	12.2
East North Central			
Urban.....	3.5	0.9	9.7
Rural.....	3.2	2.2	15.8
West North Central			
Urban.....	2.7	0.8	12.3
Rural.....	3.0	2.1	21.0
South Atlantic			
Urban.....	8.5	2.2	21.4
Rural.....	18.9	9.8	36.1
East South Central			
Urban.....	9.6	2.4	23.8
Rural.....	19.4	11.1	37.8
West South Central			
Urban.....	7.2	1.4	20.3
Rural.....	15.2	6.8	37.2
Mountain.....			
Urban.....	3.1	0.9	7.0
Rural.....	9.1	5.1	10.6
Pacific			
Urban.....	2.0	0.3	5.3
Rural.....	4.3	0.6	11.4

Abstract of the Thirteenth Census, 1910, p. 249.

37.7 per cent of the white population, and 82.3 per cent of the Negroes share the rural educational opportunities of the 62.3 per cent of the whites. Much of the illiteracy among Negroes in the United States as a whole is therefore to be attributed to the fact that they are to

such a large degree a rural people, handicapped by the inadequacy of rural educational conditions. It is safe to assume, therefore, that if the distribution of Negroes in regard to urban and rural conditions approximated that of the whole population, or of the native whites of native parentage, that the difference in illiteracy would be considerably diminished. This generalization finds further proof in comparisons between various sections of the country, North and South, rural and urban. In New England, where the colored population is 83.2 per cent urban and 16.8 per cent rural, the rate of Negro illiteracy is 7.1 per cent in cities, or somewhat less than the illiteracy of the entire population, while 16.9 per cent of the Negroes in the rural districts is illiterate. In the east south central division of states, where the native white population of native parentage is 4.2 per cent urban and 95.8 per cent rural, the rate of illiteracy among the whites is 2.4 per cent for the urban, and 11.1 per cent for the rural population. While Negro illiteracy is far in excess of that of the white population in every portion of the United States, nevertheless it is less in urban New England and the middle Atlantic divisions than that of the rural white population in the south Atlantic and east south central divisions.

These facts make it clear that however great the disparity may be in sections where conditions are similar, that, taking the country as a whole, the Negro race being so largely a southern rural people, the comparison between the actual rates of illiteracy for the white and colored populations does not reveal the true state of affairs in regard to the Negro's progress. Notwithstanding the results revealed by sectional geographic comparisons, it still remains true that Negro illiteracy is higher than that of the white population in each section as well as for the country as a whole, just as it is higher for both whites and Negroes in rural districts, as compared with urban districts, and higher in the South than in the North.

The purpose in presenting this comparison has been not to minimize the importance or amount of Negro illiteracy, but merely to show that when due allowance has been made for differences of distribution, much of the supposed evidence of race difference disappears. It seems clear that if equal advantages were afforded in school equipment in urban and rural districts, and if the Negroes were distributed in an equal ratio with the native whites of native parentage in both North and South, the total rate of illiteracy in general, now ten times as great among the Negroes as among the whites, would fall to probably three or four times the amount instead of ten.

Turning now to the decline in Negro illiteracy, it will be observed from the figures in table I that while the illiteracy for the total population declined during the period from 1880 to 1910 from 17.0 per cent to 7.7 per cent, and that of the native whites of native parentage from 8.7 to 3 per cent, that of Negro has been reduced from approximately 70 per cent to 30.4 per cent. The decline of illiteracy among the Negroes shows the same tendency toward diminution as among all the other groups barring the foreign born, except that it has been more rapid. In view of the facts of distribution presented in the previous paragraphs, this decrease has been little less than phenomenal. At the rate of decrease for the period 1880-1910, it will require only a few decades more to bring the rate down to the level of that for the country as a whole at the present time and below that of the foreign born.

The real significance of the decline among the Negroes is best observed by a comparison of age groups.

TABLE IV.—PERCENTAGE OF ILLITERACY IN THE UNITED STATES, 1910

Age period	All classes	Native white of native parentage	Negroes
10 years and over.....	7.7	3.0	30.4
10 years to 14 years.....	4.1	1.7	18.9
15 years to 19 years.....	4.9	1.9	20.3
20 years to 24 years.....	6.9	2.3	23.9
25 years to 34 years.....	7.3	2.4	24.6
35 years to 44 years.....	8.1	3.0	32.3
45 years to 64 years.....	10.7	5.0	52.7
65 years and over.....	14.5	7.3	74.5

Abstract of the Thirteenth Census, 1910, p. 240.

It is interesting to note here that illiteracy among Negro children 10 to 14 years of age is but 18.9 per cent and that the rate does not rise to that of the group as a whole until the age of 35 years or over, and that beyond the age of 45 it is from 50 to 75 per cent. The present generation of Negro children is therefore enjoying greatly improved conditions and is taking advantage of them. Without further improvement, the next generation will show a reduction of illiteracy to approximately 20 per cent.

The present status of Negro illiteracy in the group 10 to 14 years of age, however, when compared with the same age group among the

whites is again unfair, in view of the facts revealed by the figures of school attendance, so far as these figures may be taken as an index of school facilities afforded. The percentage of school attendance of native white children of native parentage in the United States between the ages of 6 to 20 is 65.9 per cent in urban communities, and 67.3 per cent in rural districts. The same respective figures for colored children are 51.7 per cent and 46.1 per cent. In the south Atlantic division, which is typical of the South in general, the corresponding figures for white are: urban, 59.1 per cent; rural, 63.7 per cent; for colored, urban 48.9, rural 46.6. If, therefore, the colored children had an equal opportunity with the white the difference in illiteracy would be still further reduced.

At the present time and with conditions as they are, the illiteracy of Negro children between 10 and 14 years of age is little more than that for the country as a whole for that portion of the population above 65 years of age, and only a little more than double that of the native whites of native parentage above that age. If statistics were available, they would doubtless show Negro illiteracy among the early age groups in the urban North to be somewhat below that of the older age groups in the native white population in the rural South.

Summarizing, a few generalizations may be made:

1. Negro illiteracy throughout the United States and in every geographic division is greatly in excess of that in the white portion of population.

2. When due allowance is made for differences of distribution in which the vast majority of Negroes share the inadequate facilities for education of the minority of the whites, the disparity in the amount of illiteracy is partially explained without reference to racial qualities or ability.

3. The rapid reduction of Negro illiteracy from something above 95 per cent to 30.4 per cent in fifty years of freedom, and constituting the largest element in the diminution of illiteracy for the United States as a whole, is a phenomenal race achievement.

4. Continuous and rapid reduction in Negro illiteracy is likely to continue through improvement of facilities. To the extent to which an equality of opportunity North and South, urban and rural, is secured will the rate of Negro illiteracy decline until it tends to approximate that of the white.

5. If achievement is measured, not in terms of actual accomplishment, but in the amount of progress made from the point of departure, then there may be little ground for complaint or discouragement, but rather a just feeling of satisfaction and of optimism in the degree of attainment toward ability to read and write accomplished by the Negro race in the United States in its fifty years of freedom.